

Woodchopper Roadhouse  
Left bank of the Yukon, approximately  
one mile upriver from Woodchopper Creek,  
Circle vicinity  
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve  
Alaska

HABS No. AK-44

HABS  
AK,  
23-CIRC.V,  
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

INDEX TO PHOTOGRAPHS

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Jet Lowe, photographer      August 1984

AK-44-1              SOUTH ELEVATION

AK-44-2              NORTH ELEVATION FROM NORTHWEST

AK-44-3              CABIN SOUTH AND EAST SIDES

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AK,  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WOODCHOPPER ROADHOUSE

HABS No. AK-44

Location: Left bank of Yukon River, approximately 1 mile upriver of Woodchopper Creek, approximately 55 miles upriver from Circle in the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

USGS Charley River Quadrangle, UTM Coordinates: 07.7250005.393025.

Present Occupant/  
Use: Vacant.

Present Owner: U. S. Government.

Significance: Woodchopper Roadhouse, built ca. 1910, is the largest and oldest log structure on the Yukon between Eagle and Circle. Located halfway between the two towns, the roadhouse housed winter travelers and served as a wood stop for steamboats in the summer. In addition, the roadhouse functioned as post office and town center for the mining community on Woodchopper Creek from the early 20th century until the 1930s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1910. No exact date can be attached to this structure, but it is thought that this building was built at about the time the mining on Woodchopper Creek began to thrive. In the 1917-18 Polk's Directory, Valentine Smith was listed as running a roadhouse on Woodchopper Creek, which was probably this building.
2. Builder: Valentine Smith was the probable builder, but no information could be found which would definitely link him to its construction.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The original owner is thought to be Valentine Smith, a miner, who had it until 1919 when Fred Brentlinger, also a miner, ran the roadhouse. In about 1929, Jack Welch and his wife took over the roadhouse from Brentlinger. They stayed until 1944, when Kate Welch died and Jack Welch left. See B. Historical Context, below, for more information on these owners.

4. Original plans and construction: The two-story building is constructed of round logs, saddlenotched. The second floor was partitioned into four rooms, which as late as 1976 still had bed frames and wardrobes. These have since disappeared. The interior had a canvas or linen material on the walls and ceiling, and a board floor covered with linoleum. Color slides of rolls of wallpaper and their identifying marks, found in the building in the mid-1970s, are in the collection of Jules Tileston, Bureau of Land Management.
5. Alterations and additions: The moss chinking between the logs was covered with cement, probably some time after construction. The roof of this building has collapsed and the first-floor flooring has been destroyed by flooding.
6. Outbuildings: The outbuildings whose remains are visible today appear on the 1926 Mertie photograph. They include: a shed west of the roadhouse which now has only four or five courses of logs still in place, but which in the 1926 photograph had a gable roof; a cabin west of the shed which, judging from the bunk and furniture still inside, had some residential use; dog barns, west of the cabin; and a shed northeast of the roadhouse which has lapjointed corners and is now missing its roof.

B. Historical Context:

By 1898, Woodchopper Creek had its name, which was probably derived from woodchopping that occurred here to provide fuel for steamboats (Orth, 1058). In 1898, there were 75 to 100 steamboats on the Yukon, so the need for fuel was well documented (Brooks, 417). The first steamboat on the Yukon was the Alaska Commercial Company's Yukon, which appeared in 1869. At the early wood stops, "it was customary for steamboats to tie up to the river bank, while their crews cut wood and carried it on board" (Collier, 13). The steamship companies soon contracted with woodchoppers to have the wood ready, and various woodyards were established along the Yukon. On one upriver trip in 1905, a steamer stopped three times between Circle and Eagle to take on a total of 54½ cords of wood (Hackman, 44). In the late 1930s, another steamer used just one woodyard between Eagle and Circle, Heinie Miller's at Sheep Creek (Tatonduk River) (Knutson, 171). The cord wood piled on the bank in the 1926 photograph of Woodchopper Roadhouse indicates that Woodchopper, too, was a wood stop.

There may have been previous buildings on this site. During an 1896 journey, William Douglas Johns noted, "when we got up to Woodchopper Creek...I went on with a party who had overtaken us....I went on with them, abandoning nearly everything, including my rifle, at a cabin at the mouth of the

creek"(Johns, 163). On February 15, 1901, Judge James Wickersham "had noon lunch with 'Pete the Pig' at the mouth of Woodchopper Creek" (Wickersham, 63). It is not clear whether these cabins, or perhaps they are the same cabin, are on the site of the roadhouse, as they are identified as being at the mouth of Woodchopper Creek, whereas the roadhouse is a mile east. Nonetheless, these references show human habitation in the immediate area at an early date.

It was, of course, the gold mining that brought people into this area at the turn of the twentieth century. By 1906, Woodchopper Creek was an active mining district:

Five miles from the Yukon, Mineral Creek, the scene of some placer mining, joins Woodchopper Creek from the south. Though Mineral Creek was staked as early as 1898, actual mining did not begin until several years later. In 1906 eighteen men were engaged in mining on this creek and more or less work was done on seven claims. Most of the work was done by "shoveling in" methods, but one small hydraulic plant was used for stripping and three steam hoists were operated. Most of the mining was done in winter with the aid of steam points. The total production for 1906 is estimated to have been \$18,000, of which four-fifths was taken out in winter" (Brooks, #314, 203-4).

In the winter of 1909-10, fifteen men worked three claims on Woodchopper, and in the summer six men worked two claims. At the same time, twenty men were on Coal Creek, and about sixteen on Sam Creek (Ellsworth and Parker, 172). In 1913, about twenty men were on Woodchopper and six or eight on CoalCreek (Chapin, 360). There was less mining activity on Woodchopper in the 1920s, coinciding with a gold depression and dry summers that made mining difficult. In 1925, "at Woodchopper the population consists mainly of the 15 or 20 men engaged in mining and prospecting on Woodchopper, Coal, and Sam creeks." On Woodchopper the mining activity was concentrated on Mineral Creek, a tributary about five miles from its mouth, and on Iron Creek, about 2 miles above Mineral Creek (Mertie, #816, 10, 165). It was at Iron Creek that Alluvial Gold, Inc., the McRae-Patty interests that were expanding from Coal Creek to Woodchopper, concentrated their activities beginning in 1935 (Mertie, #897-C, 255-257). Alluvial Gold brought in a dredge and other heavy equipment and actively mined there until the early 1960s. Some mining activities continue on the site.

Typical of the early miners and prospectors was Valentine "Woodchopper" Smith. (It is not known whether Smith got his nickname because he was a woodchopper or because he lived at Woodchopper.) Born in Germany in 1861, Smith immigrated to the U.S. in 1883 (1910 Census). He first staked a claim on Colorado Creek, a tributary of Coal Creek, in 1905. In 1907

and 1908 he staked several claims on Coal Creek in association with Frank Slaven and others and in 1910 he staked his first claim on Woodchopper (Circle District Mining Locations 2:295; 3:224, 225, 302, 303, 304; 4:4, 30, 142, 148, 360). In 1914, the Mining and Scientific Press stated that:

Placer mining continues in the Woodchopper Creek district of Alaska. Most of the operations are on a small scale and of the pick-and-shovel order, although plans are under way for a hydraulic plant....On Woodchopper, John Holstrom, Frank Bennett, Valentine Smith, and Fred Meyers are working on a small scale" (Hurja, 888).

Smith continued mining, staking claims, and ordering equipment from Ott & Scheele in Eagle (Ott & Scheele to V. Smith, July 17, 1917). It is not known exactly when he began running the roadhouse, but on July 20, 1915, Art Reynolds, on a trip upriver from Circle, "stopt at Mr. Smith's awhile. He gave us a salmon. Came about 4 miles above his place, camped for night." In the 1917-18 Polk's Directory, Valentine Smith is listed as running a roadhouse on Woodchopper Creek. This is the latest mention of him in any records, however; he presumably left the area at about this time.

The next owner of the roadhouse was Fred Brentlinger, who did not appear in this area in the 1910 census, but he must have come in that year. He staked his first claim, on Coal Creek, in October, 1910, and staked others on Webber Creek and Woodchopper Creek, with the last one being in 1928 (Circle District Mining Locations, 4:135, 191, 373, 374, 375, 418, 449, 454, 457, 479, 500, 536, 5:27, 28, 36, 157, 310, 311). Brentlinger acted as notary public on one of Smith's claims in 1914 (Circle District Mining Locations 5:360) and was appointed postmaster at Woodchopper in 1919. He served until the post office closed in 1923 (Ricks, 72). On December 25, 1927, Art Reynolds wrote that "We drove to Woodchopper for Xmas dinner. Found Bretlinger and Slaven there." Brentlinger apparently left the area in about 1929, as records of him after that date cannot be found.

The next operators of the roadhouse were Jack and Kate Welch, who came in about 1929 or 1930. Ernest Patty, in response to a tourist who guessed, "I'll bet that fellow doesn't know who's president of the United States," described them:

Jack Welch, with his big rawboned frame, his swarthy face, and the cast in one eye which gave him a menacing look would have made an excellent movie heavy. But he could have named the president and probably most of his cabinet. I have seen copies of Time and the National Geographic on a table in his cabin. More important, he had mastered the rugged environment of the Yukon in a way that few other men have done.

His wife was a small, quiet, hard-working woman, very proud of Jack. She operated the Post Office, serving a dozen prospectors and trappers, and ran the roadhouse where a traveler on the river could stop for a meal and a bed (Patty, 144-145).

Kate Welch served as postmistress from 1932 to 1936 (Ricks, 72). Jack ran a trapline in the winter, had a fishwheel in the summer, and earned some money with his river boat (Patty, 144-145). Welch's dogsled, made by Charlie Mayo of Rampart, is in the museum at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. In the early 1940s, the Welches had a terrifying experience during break-up, recounted by Ernest Patty (145-147). Later, Jack Welch attempted suicide with a .22 but only wounded himself. Kate, although crippled with rheumatism, dragged herself two miles to their nearest neighbor, George McGregor, for help. She died as a result of the effort, and when Jack returned from Fairbanks he was clearly mentally unbalanced. He built himself a boat and floated downriver, probably out to the Bering Sea. He was never seen again (Patty, 147-149; C. Biederman).

Woodchopper Roadhouse served as an important stop for travelers from Eagle to Circle. In addition, the Biedermans, who held the mail contract from 1912 to 1938 with only a few interruptions, used the Woodchopper Roadhouse. Dogs were used to run the mail for the 160-mile trip from Circle to Eagle, and Woodchopper was where the Biedermans stopped on their fourth night of a six-day run from Eagle to Circle. At Circle, they rested one day, then returned (C. Biederman; Springer). With the mail contractors using the trail from Eagle to Circle, it was maintained, and others used it as well. The numerous dog barns and dog houses still standing at Woodchopper were not only for Welch's use, but also housed the dogs of Biederman and other visitors. In the summer, steamboats stopped at Woodchopper at least long enough to deliver mail, and undoubtedly at other times to deliver freight.

In addition, Woodchopper Roadhouse played an important role as the center of a small but active mining district. As early as 1907, Woodchopper was identified as a community, served by Circle (Polk's Directory, 1907-08). Although the post office was located there for only a few years, from 1919 to 1923 and 1932 to 1936, the roadhouse still served as a freight and mail distribution point. Miners' addresses were listed as Woodchopper, even when they were working on Coal Creek (Ott & Scheele letters). The Alaska Road Commission put money into developing the trail up Woodchopper Creek. In 1924, the project was described:

The trail leads from Woodchopper Landing on the Yukon River 8 miles up Woodchopper Creek, serving several miners and prospectors along the creek. During the past season this trail was brushed out. A number of small bridges and culverts were built. The route is now passable and will prove of great benefit in moving supplies to the mining camps in this section. Expenditure: \$445" (Alaska Road Commission, 1924, Pt. II, 66-67).

In 1929 the same trail was described as "suitable for use by pack horses in summer or double enders in winter" (Alaska Road Commission, 1929, Pt. II, 55).

In the mid 1930s Woodchopper Roadhouse became less significant to the community. When Gold Placers, Inc., began to develop Coal Creek in 1934 and its sister company, Alluvial Gold, Inc., established its presence on Woodchopper Creek in 1935, the supply system changed dramatically. The mining camp 6 miles up Coal Creek became the center of the mining community. Freight was unloaded at the mouth of Coal Creek, near Slaven's Roadhouse, and brought up Coal Creek to the camp and then over the ridge to the camp on Woodchopper Creek. The moving of the post office from Woodchopper to Coal Creek in 1936 reflected this shift. When the overland mail delivery stopped in 1938, Woodchopper suffered another setback. Airplanes took over the mail contract that year and they flew directly to Coal Creek, which had its own airfield, as did the camp at Woodchopper Creek. With the absence of the mail runners over the winter trail along the Yukon, the trail fell into disuse. At the same time, the number of miners and prospectors dropped off, and traffic along the Yukon decreased. Woodchopper Roadhouse has not been used since the Welches left in about 1944.

## PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### A. Early Views:

"Town of Woodchopper, on left bank of Yukon River a short distance above the mouth of Woodchopper Creek. Eagle district, Yukon region, Alaska. 1926." J. B. Mertie, Jr., Photographer, #1277, U.S. Geological Survey, Denver, Colorado.

### B. Interviews:

Biederman, Charlie. Interviewed by Steve Ulvi and author, July 16, 1985. Tape in collection of Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. Follow-up interview July 28, 1985.



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